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## MUNICIPAL ACTIVITY IN BRITAIN

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T. D. A. COCKERELL  
University of Colorado

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I spent the summer of 1904 in my native country, England, after an absence of about thirteen years. One who returns thus, after a considerable interval, is perhaps in a better position to appreciate the progress of affairs than a total stranger, on the one hand, or a permanent resident on the other. It gives one a curious sensation to walk the streets, and realize that the boys and girls now on their way to school were not even born when one last passed that way. Yet the old familiar scenes have not lost their character, and some of the older men seem hardly to have changed. England is England still, and yet——

In those bygone days, the ghosts of which so strangely mingle with the present, we used to assemble in the little hall—originally a stable—at Kelmscott House, overlooking the Thames at Hammersmith. Every Sunday evening the Socialist League met there, and a small audience listened while William Morris, Bernard Shaw, or some other ardent radical set forth the promise of a new and better time. I remember very well the arrival of Stepniak from Russia, and the amusement we got out of the hysterical leader one of the daily papers published thereupon. A strange man with a large beard, sitting quietly in the audience, was pointed out one evening—it was none other than Kropotkin. Then John Burns came down, and explained to us that, physically speaking, it was better to go to prison than to the workhouse. There was the veteran Craig, the hero of Ralahine, who could not refrain from expounding his views of phrenology, which interested us much less than his Irish experiences. There was Sparling, and Tochatti, and Mordhurst; and occasionally we saw Walter Crane or Edward Carpenter; while Emery Walker, the secretary, was always present and helped, not talking so much as some, but getting things done.

Today the place is shut up. Morris is dead; Bernard Shaw, they tell me, has become positively respectable; Burns may at any moment become a cabinet minister;<sup>1</sup> and, in short, the game is played out, so far as superficial appearances show. There is practically no socialist propaganda in London today, I am told; and as for the *Clarion*, the weekly socialist paper, it seems to be a success, but it is a pallid thing compared with our little *Commonweal*, which I used to sell for a penny at street corners and political meetings. Well, it could not have been otherwise. A rose does not bloom forever, and he who would sow seed must be content to lose sight of it for a while.

What, then, is the most vital, aggressive movement in this present-day England? It is, I think, this same socialism, only under a different form. The old idea of changing everything by means of a sudden revolution was finally given up, even by Morris himself; and while there may yet come revolts and bloodshed, it is wonderful to see the progress that has been made, and is likely to be made, quietly, rationally, and, as it seems to me, with astonishingly little friction.

Having freely confessed my leanings in this matter, I am glad to be able to support my statements from the other side. The *Times*, in the latter part of 1902, published a series of articles by an anonymous writer, and republished them as a pamphlet, with the title *Municipal Socialism*. This pamphlet ("6d. a copy, 30s. a hundred, £ 12. 10s. a thousand") is intended to be spread broadcast, as an awful warning. It is to be recommended especially to Americans, who have a point of view just sufficiently different to enable them to enjoy the joke. It appears that the dreadful socialists have even begun to convert the children, and at Glasgow there is a Socialist Sunday School Union, which brings out a halfpenny monthly magazine, called the *Young Socialist*.

The *Times* writer, after stating that the socialists plan to capture the various administrative bodies of the country, goes on to say :

<sup>1</sup> This prophecy, lately fulfilled, was penned before the downfall of the Balfour cabinet.—Ed.

No one can fail to be convinced of the last-mentioned fact who contemplates the long list of duties, responsibilities, and enterprises already undertaken by local governing bodies, coupled with the rage that some among them show for municipalizing practically everything that they can get within their grasp. Many of these duties and responsibilities, though hardly coming within the range of local government pure and simple, may in themselves be most excellent and praiseworthy. But they nevertheless indicate a marked tendency to take over obligations, trades, and industries exactly on the socialistic lines; . . . they represent, collectively, a rapid drifting toward the full and complete realization of the socialist idea.

There is no doubt that the *Times* writer has allowed his fervor to carry him a little beyond the limits of exact truth; but he is correct in regard to the direction of the movement, if not as to its amount or purely socialistic character. The municipal management of street-cars, water-works, gas, gardens, and even houses has become commonplace, but that is not nearly all.

The idea of providing sterilized milk for babes was started at St. Helens a few years ago, the corporation supplying not only the milk, but feeding-bottles as well, while to each purchaser there were given two nipples, which she was required to bring at intervals to the corporation milk-store, so that they could be tested as to their cleanliness. Liverpool, Dukinfield, York, Ashton-under-Lyne, Belfast, and other towns have since adopted the system, notwithstanding protests which have been raised in certain quarters that the corporations were competing unfairly with the large firms of milk-dealers.

It has even been proposed that the milk supply for adults should also be municipalized, and this "may follow in due course." The municipalization of the liquor traffic is being much discussed, and *The Case for Municipal Drink* is excellently set forth in a little book published in 1904, written by Edward R. Pease. This question of drink is such a large one that it deserves a separate article; but it is worth while to note here that much has already been accomplished by private or semi-public agencies, working in the interests of the public. Mr. Pease thus describes the origin of the Public House Trust Companies:

The origin of this most influential movement was dramatic. In 1900 Earl Grey, the owner of Broomhall, a mining village in Northumberland, applied for an additional license for that village at the desire of its inhabitants. When it was granted, he was forthwith offered £10,000 for what he had acquired "without spending a single sixpence." Struck by the iniquity

of this transaction, Earl Grey took up the matter with extraordinary vigor. Not content with organizing a trust company for Northumberland to take over this and other licenses, and manage them for the public benefit, he has created a network of county and other companies already covering almost every county of England and parts of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. . . . The companies themselves, already formed on a semi-official basis, will no doubt gladly transfer their undertakings to any elected authority authorized by Parliament to accept them. The public spirit which animated the founder, Earl Grey, will assuredly continue to actuate his followers.

The consideration of the above case, and others like it, shows very well that the fundamental difference between public and private ownership is rather one of motive on the one hand, and benefit on the other, than of mere legal definition. For example, if certain money or property, legally and nominally belonging to the public, is really used for the private gain of a political ring, there is no real public ownership. Or again, if money and property, legally and nominally belonging to some individual, are used for the benefit of the public, they become, at least while so used, public property in a very true sense. No socialist, even, can suppose that at any time all public property will be literally controlled equally by all the citizens; on the contrary, many things, such as machines, will have to be placed in the hands of experts, who will have special authority concerning them, just exactly as if they owned them in the ordinary sense. This is so far true that public and private ownership may be looked on as not at all incompatible, when ownership is considered to be the power to use, not that to barter away or destroy.<sup>2</sup> From this standpoint, in certain communities, a legally private ownership might be the only means of bringing about a genuine public ownership; for example, suppose that in a certain city a man had a valuable collection of some sort, which he desired to give to the public, but he knew that the city was controlled at that time by a corrupt ring which would undoubtedly place an incompetent curator in charge, and generally let the collection go to ruin. The wise would-be donor, in such a case, would undoubtedly

<sup>2</sup> Use-ownership and exchange-ownership (or use-rights and exchange-rights) should be regarded separately, just as are use-value and exchange-value. In this connection it is interesting to recall that we consider it criminal voluntarily to part with our lives, though they are our own.

place his collection in the hands of a board of his own selection, or retain it in his own hands, in order that it might be properly cared for, and really serviceable to the public. In the light of these considerations, many of the differences between apparently opposite policies may be found to disappear. The promoters of municipal ownership should make it clear that they are after the substance rather than the legal shadow of it; and, in reply to examples of municipal corruption, should answer that these result, not from public ownership, but from the failure of the public to own that to which it had a legal right. Miss Octavia Hill has shown what a "private" landlord may do in London, if entirely devoted to the interests of the tenants. Superficially, her results might be held to constitute an argument for the private ownership of tenements; but, as a matter of fact, she has acted as a very honest and efficient public servant. No doubt even the socialist state could not do better than retain the services of such "landlords," actuated by such motives!

The problem of municipal housing is naturally one of the most pressing in the large cities. The London County Council has been and is active in this matter, and no doubt intends to proceed until there is not a slum within its jurisdiction. I was much pleased to find stately municipal buildings overlooking the former site of Millbank Prison, while the large open space between the buildings and the river was occupied by a beautiful flower-garden and a picture-gallery. That garden is one of many such recently established in London, and is typical of the aims of the reformers. When I met Mr. John Burns later, he asked me if I had seen that garden, and showed by his manner that he thought it not one of the least useful things he had helped into being. It struck me as highly significant that even in the sordid city so much emphasis should be placed on the æsthetic side of things.

It must not be supposed that the building operations of the London County Council have gone forward without opposition; nor can it be said that all the objections raised are meaningless. The very buildings just referred to are objected to on two grounds: they are too tall, and otherwise criticisable in respect to

architecture; while they do not house the poorer people who were dispossessed, because these cannot afford to live in them. The only thing that can be said about the architectural features is that the law at present requires the new houses to find room for as many people as inhabited the old, and the only way to do this and avoid overcrowding is to make tall buildings. It is admitted by those who are supporters of municipal building that the time will probably come when the present structures will be replaced by different and more desirable ones. In the meanwhile it does seem to me that the London County Council has done well, considering the legal restrictions, and the difficulty and expense of securing much land. With regard to the dispossessed poor, it is argued that if superior accommodations are provided for the better class of workers, they will vacate other premises, and so there will be a general move upward all along the line. This is no doubt a valid argument, up to a certain point; but the slum difficulty will not be overcome without more radical action than the council is empowered to take, and it is evidently unreasonable to expect so great an evil to be removed at once.

Mr. Bernard Shaw deals with the housing question at some length in his excellent little book, *The Common Sense of Municipal Trading*. He compares the disadvantages of a municipality, under the present law, with the freedom of private enterprise, and the specific instances he gives are worth citing:

If the obligation to rehouse were imposed on private and municipal enterprise alike, municipal housing would be at no disadvantage on this point. But commercial enterprise is practically exempt from such social obligations. Within recent years Chelsea has been transfigured by the building operations of Lord Cadogan. Hundreds of acres of poor dwellings have been demolished and replaced by fashionable streets and "gardens." The politics of Chelsea, once turbulently Radical, are now effusively Conservative. The sites voluntarily set aside by Lord Cadogan for working-class dwellings on uncommercial principles of public spirit and personal honor have not undone the inevitable effects of the transfiguration of the whole neighborhood. The displaced have solved the rehousing problem by crossing the river into Battersea. Thus Lord Cadogan is more powerful than the Chelsea Borough Council. He can drive the poorer inhabitants out of the borough; the council cannot. He can replace them with rich inhabitants; the council cannot. He can build what kind of house pays him best—mansion, shop, stable or pile of

flats; the council cannot. Under such circumstances comparison between the results of his enterprise and the council's is idle. The remedy is either to curtail Lord Cadogan's freedom until it is no greater than the council's, or else to make the council as free as Lord Cadogan. As the former alternative would end in nothing being done at all, and rendering impossible such great improvements as have been made both in Chelsea and Battersea by Lord Cadogan's enterprise, the second alternative—that of untying the hands of the ratepayer—is obviously the sensible one.

Mr. Bernard Shaw arrives at the conclusion that the housing problem cannot be satisfactorily solved until the municipality owns all the land within its boundaries, and is as free to deal with it as our ground landlords are at present. In the *Times* pamphlet, already referred to, the following passage is interesting:

At the conference of the municipal representatives held at Glasgow in September, 1901, to discuss the housing question one of the speakers said: "We don't want to house everybody;" whereupon someone else called out: "Why not?" These two words sum up the whole situation as the socialists see it.

The street-car or tramway traffic has been taken up all over the country by municipalities, with great success. I looked with astonishment on the great suburban cars running out of London, usually crowded with passengers; and at Southampton and elsewhere I rode in municipal trams. Of course, even these do not fail to meet with opposition, particularly since they must inevitably interfere with the local railroad traffic, and with various interests along the line. For example, it has been found that when the tramways were extended into certain neighborhoods close to great cities, people who formerly traded at the local stores would get on the cars and do their shopping in the large city establishments, where there was greater variety of choice, and very likely better prices. This sort of difficulty, which is undoubtedly far from imaginary, is gravely cited as something inherent in municipal enterprise, as if it did not result from private commercial enterprise everywhere! I knew a storekeeper in New Mexico who vigorously opposed the coming of the railroad, and quite rightly so far as his own personal interests were concerned.



The Glasgow tramways have often been cited as especially successful, and hence they are singled out by the *Times* writer for detailed criticism. He ends his remarks with gloomy prophecy as follows :

When, in due course, heavy charges for renewals in connection with the tramways have to be met, and the reserve funds are found to be inadequate to meet them, because the "profits" have been given to the tramway users in the form of reduced fares, it is at the risk of these very ratepayers that the further sums required will have to be raised. The whole enterprise is a case of "heads, the tramway patrons win; tails, the ratepayers lose."

The writer of the article cited is much exercised because the "profits" of the tramway traffic do not compare with those he supposes a private company might have made, but he complains bitterly that the surplus money obtained was devoted to improving the service and reducing the fares. This, he says, is favoring the tramway patrons at the expense of the other ratepayers; but it does not occur to him that whatever money was made above running expenses came straight out of the tramway patron's pockets. As to whether the sums set aside to meet various contingencies are sufficient, time alone can show; but the article cited was published in 1902, and I am indebted to Mr. John Burns for a copy of the report of the Glasgow tramways for the year ending May 31, 1903, showing things to be in an ever more flourishing condition than heretofore.

It must not be supposed that municipal management completely does away with labor disputes; nor would it, I think, be desirable that employees should always be ready meekly to take what was given to them. Last summer there was a sort of conspiracy among certain tramway employees in the London area, to offer to strike on the eve of a bank holiday, when they well understood that their services could not be dispensed with without heavy loss to the London County Council and great inconvenience to the public. They accordingly drew up a list of grievances, some of them not unreasonable, and sent it in when the sittings of the Council were over, and the members were dispersed everywhere taking their holidays. This came to the knowledge of Mr. John Burns, and he spent two whole days riding about

on the cars, not saying much, but dropping a hint here and there, and effectually preventing the projected strike. The fact was that the men were in the wrong, and they knew it; they knew also, that whatever complaints they made would be fairly considered when the council met. Under such circumstances it required only a judicious man of known integrity to restore peace; but it would have been very different if instead of the county council there had been a private company acting on purely "business" principles. It may also be added that the existence of such men as Mr. Burns and many of his colleagues on the council shows that public service is capable of attracting ability no less than private enterprise. In England such service brings credit and approval, and if it also brings abuse, it cannot be said at the present day that riches obtained by dubious means bring less. Putting the thing on the plane of the merest self-interest and self-gratification, I do not think John Burns would exchange places with any millionaire.

The opponents of municipal enterprises often make the criticism that the councils grant conditions to their employees which are better than those given by private concerns, and thereby rob the ratepayers in general for the benefit of a limited class. The *Times* critic presents the following instance:

A firm of brass-founders and iron-workers were invited by a local body to tender for a certain article. It was intimated to them, however, that it would be of no use for them to do so unless they were paying to the men employed in making the article the trade-union wage of 35s. a week. In point of fact, they were not employing men on the work at all, but youths and girls, who were perfectly well able to do it, but got a wage considerably lower than that specified. The firm could thus have afforded to send in a low tender, but, in the circumstances, they thought it useless to send in any at all; and the presumption is that the local authority in question accepted a tender based on the higher wage, and thus had to pay a good deal more for the article than the real market price.

The answer to this sort of criticism is, of course, perfectly obvious. If the ratepayers, through their agents, see fit to treat their employees decently, merely as a matter of local honor and pride, they are surely not to be blamed for doing so, even though a minority may object. But, after all, why should it be assumed

that the lowest rate of wages is the just one; is it not possible, to say the least, that a low wage might be the means of fleecing a certain section of employees (and ratepayers) for the financial gain of the rest? For this sort of injustice our critic has no condemnation, because it is done everywhere in the course of business. Finally, from a wholly "business" point of view, it may pay a municipality very well to pay its employees good wages, when it would not pay a private establishment. This is because, as Bernard Shaw well points out, the municipality has to take care of all its inhabitants, from the cradle to the grave; and if they fail and get into difficulties, it has to provide poor-houses and prisons, police and courts, and whatever other agencies are necessary. It also suffers from the ill-effects of one person on another; and, in fact, it is quite impossible to say where the advantages or disadvantages arising from any particular action cease. The municipality is like a man who cannot afford to overeat himself or get drunk, because he will have to suffer the consequences; but the private trader can tickle his palate to any extent, as it were, because the stomach which will be outraged is none of his.

The public-school idea is as yet inadequately developed in England, and some of the things which seem like innovations in that country, we take as a matter of course. The *Times* writer says with horror in his tones:

The children [of a certain London district] have hitherto been cared for in some good schools at West Ham, but fresh schools are being put up for them at Shenfield, Essex, at a cost of over £200,000. There they will have swimming-baths, gymnasium, farm, and other attractions of which even an ordinary first-class boarding-school could not boast, so that the children of the poor will be far better off than the children of most of the ratepayers who will bear the cost.

When I was staying at a place called River, near Dover, I was struck by the contrast between the English school, which I formerly accepted as a matter of course, and that to which I had grown accustomed in America. The whole place had the air of poverty, and the children were dirty and seemed ill cared for. They were, of course, the children of the "poor;" the well-to-do

people on the neighboring hill sent their sons and daughters to boarding establishments for "young gentlemen" and "young ladies." It seemed to me that the American public school recognized everywhere as a general means of education, and willingly supported even by the least progressive communities, marked an advance in civilization the purport of which could hardly be exaggerated. England will have to get over being scandalized at attempts made to provide the best education for the children of the "poor," no matter what pockets are turned inside out to find the money.

The London County Council has just taken over the whole educational system of London; and since the schools are excessively numerous and greatly lacking in common standards, the task of unifying everything and bringing it into line with modern requirements is a gigantic one. It is too soon, as yet, to say much about results; but what is to be said in anticipation will be found in a little book by Mr. Sidney Webb, published, I think, last year.

The technical schools of the London County Council have been in operation for some time, and have met with considerable success. My brother, Mr. Douglas Cockerell, has charge of the bookbinding classes, and from him I was able to learn much about the aims and scope of the schools. In bookbinding, as in other trades, mechanical appliances are tending to take the place of hand-work, and while the production of books is thereby increased, the skilled worker is becoming gradually extinct. With the abandonment of the old system of apprentices, the worker ceases to obtain a broad knowledge of his trade, and the final outcome is, as William Morris stated, that even those who would have good things cannot get them at any price. In the county council workshops, however, an attempt is made to give a broader training, and to preserve the individuality of the worker. In this way it is hoped that the artistic crafts, and those requiring much individual initiative, will be preserved, and by degrees the public may be so educated as to prefer good quality and variety to cheapness and monotony. There is a fallacy in the doctrine that supply always follows demand; on the contrary,

demand is usually the outcome of supply in the first instance. Our needs are the fruit of past advantages, not merely the prophecy of future hunger. There is danger in the extinction of the arts, lest they should be wholly forgotten and undemanded.

While the technical schools thus render an inestimable service, I fear that their ends may be defeated to a considerable extent by commercialism.<sup>3</sup> It remains to be seen how far the movement can be carried with economic success; and while the "trade" has already been influenced by it, it is hardly to be hoped that there will never be a reciprocal detrimental effect. Such considerations will not, of course, prevent the work from being carried forward with zeal, and all who value the arts should lend their support. As Morris always insisted, in the long run it becomes a question of the freedom of the worker, and this is equally true in all fields of intellectual effort. It is here that the socialist and the individualist are one.

There is much outcry in certain quarters at the great increase of municipal debt. It is hardly necessary in this article to discuss this question at length, but the following from Bernard Shaw is worth quoting:

According to the popular view, the thrifty course is to pay as you go, and not add to "the burden of municipal debt." The correct financial theory is undoubtedly the reverse: all expenditure on public works should be treated as capital expenditure. The capital should be raised in the cheapest market, and the rates used to pay the interest and sinking-fund. When a municipality which can borrow at less than 4 per cent. deliberately extorts capital for public works from tradesmen who have to raise it at from 10 to 40 per cent., or even more, it is clearly imposing the grossest unthrift on its unfortunate constituents. In practice everything depends on the duration of the work.

<sup>3</sup> Whether the influence comes directly from the masters or the men, its origin is the same. I read in the *Bookbinding Trades Journal*, 1904, p. 48, "The technical classes, as at present arranged, are not of much use to the apprentices of our trade, and the action of the London County Council in instituting classes to teach women bookbinding is likely to be resented by our union. Already the employers have moved in the matter, and a joint conference between the secretaries of the London societies of bookbinders and the committee of federated employers has been held and adjourned. To my mind, nothing but strenuous resistance to the London County Council's plans, in conjunction with other trades, can avert a calamity.—Arthur J. Carter.

It would be absurd to pay for an electric-lighting plant out of the half-year's revenue. It would be silly to raise a loan to clear away a snowfall.

The practical identity of the so-called "debt" with what is called "capital" in private business is well shown by a concrete illustration taken from *Does Municipal Management Pay?* by R. B. Suthers (1902) :

In Manchester the corporation [i. e., municipality] own the gas-works; in Liverpool a private company owns the gas-works. Up to 1897 Manchester had spent £1,833,000 on its works; Liverpool had spent £1,918,000. The £1,833,000 spent by Manchester is called "debt," but the £1,918,000 spent by Liverpool is called "capital." What is the difference? There is no difference except in name. The Manchester "debt" is just as much "capital" as the other. How was the Liverpool capital raised? It was subscribed in sums of different amounts by individuals. How was the Manchester "debt" raised? In exactly the same way. The Manchester corporation issue "stock." Private individuals apply for the stock. The Liverpool Gas Company issue "shares," which bear dividends according to the profits made. The "stock" of the Manchester corporation bears a fixed interest or dividend. Any surplus profit goes into the pockets of the citizens.

Of other municipal enterprises it is not necessary now to write. The main purpose of this article has been to direct attention to a movement of the greatest importance, too little understood or appreciated in this country. Whatever may be thought of the idealism that is at the bottom of so much of it, it must be admitted that we in America should be better off and more progressive if we had clearer ideals of civic life—things to work and hope for. The "What's the use?" feeling paralyzes the efforts of our good citizens, who go nowhere because they see no road.

And, after all, has not something come out of that stable at Hammersmith?